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Grizzly Fears

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It's been over twenty-five years now since I had my first serious encounter with a grizzly bear. Just a kid, crazy for the wild and adventure, I was staying in an old cabin on the Tanana River, thirty miles southeast of Fairbanks, building my own log cabin just downstream. Late August like it was, the nights were starting to get dark for a few hours, a contrast to the round-the-clock sunlight of full summer. I had a dog along with me, a simple-minded husky that a friend had asked me to care for over the summer. At night the dog slept outside on the front stoop of the cabin. In the time I watched that dog I never once witnessed it do one particularly notable thing, other than eat at an astonishing rate of speed. Still, I owe that dog a debt.

The head of my bed was about three feet from the cabin's only door, a rickety wooden slat affair that admitted huge drafts of frigid air on winter days. I'd been asleep only an hour or so when I woke to the unmistakable urgent, gut-bending whoof of a husky badly scared. I lay quietly then, eyes wide staring up into the blackness. The dog yelped once then ran behind the cabin and began whoofing again. I sat up. Suddenly something big hit the cabin door, rattling it like it was a sheet of craft paper. Then came a low, insistent, growl, a terrifying, primal sound with enough big-creature in it to send adrenaline pummeling through my veins.

That was back in my dedicated hook n' bullet days when I never went anywhere without some kind of a firearm. I shucked my arms out of my sleeping bag and grabbed the thirty-ought-six leaning up against the wall by the head of my bed. I pushed the safety off and jacked the bolt. With a sinking feeling I felt the bolt miss the shell.

Over the summer months the clip spring had weakened enough so that it would not push the top shell up high enough for the bolt to receive it. To make a long story short, I felt pretty helpless at that point, so ended up stumbling around in the dark with my useless rifle pointed at the door, hollering "get the hell out of here!", until the creature finally left and made the sad mistake of going upriver to my neighbor Denis's place. Denis, a huge man from Minnesota, known locally (not to his face of course) as Grizzly Den, was a fellow who would kill just about anything he could get his sights on, damn the season, damn the species. The creature entered Denis's compound and tried to crawl into the corral with his skidding horse. Denis's sled dogs, all thirty of them, began baying. Denis leaped out of bed, naked as a tortelleni, and shot at a hazy black silhouette from his front porch.

What followed was a testimony to the youthful impetuousness and testosterone overload that most of us young male, Tanana bush-dwellers were victims of

then. Denis and his (reluctant) wife, Cathy, came down and got me, and off we went through the moonless night, stumbling along by the light of a hissing Coleman lantern, following the dull rust spatters of a blood trail, accompanied here and there by the unmistakable prints of a large bear. We followed the trail a hundred yards up along the river bank before it cut into the woods. We'd made about fifty slow yards in the woods when the world suddenly erupted. Brush snapped and popped just out of the reach of the lantern light. Agonized, angry roars beat against the trees like the devil's own voice. We held our rifles ready for the charge, for a snarling fury to erupt through our pale circle of light. But none came. And then as suddenly as it had begun it ended. The dark woods around us were completely silent.

I am happy to report that we were at least smart enough to give up the pursuit at that point. We went back to our respective cabins. The next morning we got up at first light and picked up the trail again. When we approached the spot where we'd heard the roaring, the ground all about was gouged and ripped, small trees scarred and broken like grass stems. At the base of a big spruce we found him, an old boar grizzly, shot hard, up high and behind the lungs, stretched full out on his stomach, his head twisted grotesquely off to his right and up under his leg. Blood froth rimmed his mouth. His canines were broken and dangling from their roots. That bear had given up life in great agony. I remember thinking the way his head was twisted up under his leg like that, it looked like he had been ashamed to die the way he had.

He was a big bear, record book, but old and thin, missing back teeth; no way would he have made the winter. The outside toes on his right front foot were gone, most likely lost to a trap at some early point of his life. Those missing toes were the clear signature of a bear that had raided cabins up along the Salcha River for years. Glad as I was that he hadn't come into the cabin with me, I remember wishing him a better, more dignified death.

I try now to recall how I felt standing there in the dark woods with that bear roaring his death throes. It's strange, but I don't recall any fear. I was afraid in the cabin because I felt so helpless. But in the woods, all I can remember is a calmness, a feeling of being exactly where I wanted to be. Mixed with it, too, was a sense of exhilaration. This same mix of feelings I've experienced other times, always when I've been in the most danger.

I started thinking seriously about fear and grizzly bears two Augusts ago when I was attempting to see as much of the Bob Marshall Wilderness as I could. "The Bob," as they call it in western Montana, is a pretty piece of country, about as wild, I suppose, as it gets in the Lower 48. When people asked me what I was up to and I told them I was exploring The Bob, I couldn't help but note how routine their responses were: "There's grizzlies in there, you know," or "Youre going in there with all those grizzlies?" The notion seems to cling like a unwanted house guest, that grizzly bears inhabit every possible nook and cranny of the western Montana wilderness, and if you don't watch out real careful you're going to end

up dead, looking like you've been tackled by ... well, by a grizzly bear.

For sure, there are some grizzlies in The Bob. I must emphasize "some." Because relative to most places I've travelled in Alaska The Bob is a regular bear desert. In close to two-hundred miles of walking trails, as well as a fair amount of off-trail wandering, I've seen only a couple of definite grizzly signs, and not one yet in the flesh. Yet, I'm assured by Chris Servheen, head of the Federal Grizzly Bear Recovery Program, that an estimated 400 grizzlies reside in the whole Northern Continental Divide ecosystem, which includes Glacier Park. The point is, they're not around in elbow-scraping numbers, certainly not bountiful enough where you need to carry heavy artillery or spruce up your will before you leave town. From what I know about bears I'd say in The Bob they're living in some pretty confined and remote pockets, and that they'd much prefer we human types just leave them alone. Which is to say that people's fear of them is for the most part unfounded.

Ursus horribilis. The scientific name says it all. Even the fellows who were responsible for the Latin taxonomic handles could not resist revealing their fears. Not that a little well-placed fear is all bad. As I told a friend once when she asked me if I wasn't afraid of bears: "Sure I'm afraid of bears. But I'm sure glad they're out there, because it keeps a lot of people out of places they'd be in otherwise."

I think it was Doug Peacock, the grizzly guru of the West, who said, "It's not really wilderness unless there are things out there big enough to eat you." Peacock was alluding to the idea that a little reasonable, solidly grounded fear is what makes life worth living. Zest, it's called. You want safe and predictable nature, go hang out at the San Diego Zoo or Disney World. Buy stock in some newly formed virtual reality company. Try golf. Leave the few, hard-pressed and harassed grizzlies left down here in the Lower 48 alone.

Of course, fear is relative. Thinking about something is usually a lot more scary than the actual fact. For certain, our irrational fears keep a lot of us from doing some pretty wonderful things. Our fear of bears (or anything else, for that matter) leads most of us to all kinds of stop-short-of-enjoying-life-fully decisions. Like an acquaintance of mine in California who was reluctant to visit Montana because he'd heard a grizzly had walked through the streets of "some town out there." The fact that the town was Gardiner, a tiny berg up on the very north boundary of Yellowstone Park, had nothing to do with it. In his mind there were bears, dozens of them, battling over the turf in downtown Missoula and Great Falls. I have to mention again he was from California, where some real serious turf wars are going on in the streets he inhabits. And I won't even go into the irony of a place they still call the "Golden Bear State," where they managed to eliminate the last villain grizzly somewhere around the turn of the century.

The point is that there's a lot of emotional knee-jerks around the subject of

bears, all bears, but for the most part grizzlies. For example, I read a letter to the editor last year in Missoula Montana's daily paper. The author expressed outright disgust because the Fish and Wildlife Service was considering re-introducing bears back into the Bitterroot Wilderness of Idaho. He related that a nephew of his was elk hunting down in Wyoming, just "walking up a trail, and was attacked by a grizzly. He went into the fetal position and tried to act dead. His gun was nearby, but every time he reached for it, the bear hit him again."

Now in my mind that sounds like a pretty smart bear, batting a guy for reaching for a gun. Not that I want to demean the terror the young man must have felt, or the pain that he no doubt endured from lacerations that took over two-hundred stitches to close. The point, though, that's most important here runs deeper than the subject of one person having a nightmare experience with a bear. It relates to something else the letter writer had to say: "It would be a crying shame and, yes, stupid to lock people out of these beautiful areas because of fear ... ."

There it is, the old "f" word again. If the Fish and Wildlife Service put bears back in the Bitterroot it's automatically assumed by some that it becomes off limits for most of the population. I understand the reasoning, but to me it seems out of place relative to some of the things we daily accept in this society. I'm wondering how many roads the guy stays off because somebody once died in a car accident (roughly 200 Montanans a year)? Or how many lakes he wont swim in because somebody once drowned there.

The point is, most of our fears run irrational. Just because they're grizzly bears we fear them more then some things that deserve a good dose of horror, like what our own society has come to in innumerable violent ways. But I suppose, given our modern relationship with nature, it's understandable. Grizzly bears are one of the few things left, in a society that seems determined to create predictability and homogeneity, that very occasionally deliver us nature at its most horrible, unpredictable, uncaring, demeaning, and non-discriminating best. Grizzlies are a reminder of the dark side of things, of momma nature beating on the door, shoving the real goods right in our face. What with all our technological marvels, all our wise notions of dominance and security, the message still comes through: you slip up just a little bit, buddy, and you're hosed.

I've had a couple dozen encounters with grizzly bears since that first one in the cabin on the Tanana River years ago. I must hasten to add, that even though I've killed several black bears, I've never killed a grizzly. The best I can figure is some deeper instinct kept me from doing it, some sense that I would end up regretting the act at some point later in my life. Somewhere in my youthful sub-conscious I knew a deeper truth about myself, and I saved myself from killing one species I was sure to have deep regrets about when I finally made the decision to quit hunting altogether.

Yes, there came a point some years ago when I gave up hunting. I have no simple explanation for it, other than the sorrow I felt with killing began to outweigh the pleasure of the hunt. In many ways the transition from killer to who I am now has been one of the greatest satisfactions in my life. Because now I can look at something wild and not want to snuff out its life and hang its head on a wall. Now I can experience it without possessing it. My reactions can be what they are, not bedded down within the circled wagons of a macho life. And too, I can travel in the wilderness without the weight of a firearm, if I choose, and I can be there fully, fully with my fear, and fully with the joy that comes from acknowledging my fear. I say this, and as I do I know also that the old killer instinct is still never far below the surface. It can rise easily and entirely full when the circumstances are right.

Once, only a couple years after I quit hunting, my daughter, Cara, and I were fishing down in south-central Alaska, just outside the village of Cordova. Cara must have been ten or eleven at the time. We were on a stream out beyond the west side of town, where the salmon ran thick, hundreds of squirming, red-on-gray shadows through the silver boil of the rushing water. The banks alongside the creek were plastered with bear tracks as big as pie plates, the dead give-away prints of the coastal brown bear (once classified as *Ursus middendorffi*, but now considered by most taxonomists to be just a subspecies of *Ursus horribilis*.)

Cara and I had hooked a dozen salmon or more and lost them all, fishing as we were with line that was too light. I told her to keep fishing while I went back up to the truck and got some heavier line. "Keep an eye out for bears," I told her causally as I departed.

I walked up to the parking area that was over the main road, a distance of maybe a quarter mile. At the truck I ate an apple and pawed through my tackle box for lures and line, took my time before I gathered up the gear and headed back to the fishing spot. When I topped the road and looked out across the flats where Cara had been fishing, in her place, in the exact spot Id left her, stood an immense brown bear. It had its head down, looking like it was eating something. Cara wasn't in sight.

I had no rifle in the truck, but I remember this: I badly wanted one. A rifle was my first reaction; the old killer instinct reared up full, and without a gun I felt totally helpless. Of course, my mind ran crazy wild with images of my daughter lying mauled, the bear ravaging her with his huge muzzle. But such thoughts were short lived. Much to my great relief, on a trail that cut through the thick screen of black alders bordering the stream, I sighted Cara, walking fast toward me, determined, fishing pole in hand.

I quickly headed down the slope of the road to meet her. "Dad," she said as she came up to me, "did you see that?"

"I saw the bear," I said.

"No," she said, "did you see it take my fish?"

She told me the story then, calmly, not hysterically at all, just a bit awed by the circumstances in which she had found herself. She finally managed to hook a fish and get it headed for shore without breaking the line. Just as she pulled it up on the gravel bar at her feet, she heard a grunt. She looked up and a big brown bear was wading the stream toward her. "I know you told me never to run from a bear," she said, "but it looked like he was after my fish, so I just snapped it off and backed out of there."

That bear had learned a thing or two about sport fishing. His technique was to wait in the woods until someone pulled in a salmon, then quickly relieve them of it. Cara was smart to figure his game, which said something about the level-headedness and lack of fear from a kid raised around bears, who once had a black bear look in the kitchen window at her while she was eating breakfast. Her response then was, "Dad, there's a bear looking in at me." I'm tempted to say she hardly missed a beat with her cereal spoon, but that would be an exaggeration. She did finish her breakfast that day, but only after I went out the back door and shot the bear, needing meat as we did at the time.

So Cara and I garnered another bear story with a happy ending. But not all bear encounters end this way; there's no doubt about it, grizzly bears do occasionally wreak havoc. For example, in Alaska a couple summers ago two runners were killed by a grizzly on a mountain trail outside Anchorage. It was not a random killing. The runners came upon a moose carcass the bear was feeding on, and the bear apparently perceived these humans as competitors. Certainly the incident was tragic. But the news accounts reflected an irrational and entirely out of proportion fear. Murders take place in Anchorage every month of the year, yet most never make the front page of the local papers, let alone make any pages of any other paper in the state. The bear killings made the front page of every paper in Alaska, and who knows how many in the Lower 48?

Perhaps it's *important* for us to fear bears. We live in a world of natural disasters. Tornadoes for example. But nobody ever cautions me about going back to my boyhood home in Indiana because they have tornadoes there. And I've personally known several people killed by tornadoes. In contrast, I've never personally known one killed by a bear, even though I've lived a whole lot longer in bear country. Twenty-five million people live in California, with an iron-clad guarantee of multiple earthquakes, and more people are moving there every day. Yet you talk to Californians, most are totally nonchalant about earthquakes.

The difference with bears is that they just seem a lot more personal. A bear is a living thing, furry and fast, with teeth and beady little eyes and long toenails, a creature clearly not feeling all warm and fuzzy about the presence of human beings. Our response over the centuries has been to eliminate things that we perceive as a threat to us. We've figured for a long time that if we can just snuff out enough nature we can make the world safe for civilization. Today,

of course, it's old news that if we choose to, we can just exterminate a whole species. Gone. Done. Kaput. We win.

But not really. Perhaps - a highly cautious and qualified "perhaps" - a slight majority of people are beginning to figure out that "civilization" is not about making the world sterilely safe. A couple years ago the Idaho Fish and Game Department commissioned a poll regarding the reintroduction of grizzlies in the Bitterroot Mountains of the border of Idaho and Montana. In response to the poll there were some lame comments like "They'll do away with game, and the hunters do a good enough job of that already," or "It's not practical," or "Unnecessary when they're in Alaska." And another that did a masterful job of reordering history with a Zen flare: "Since they're not there now then it's not meant to be."

The poll, though, presents a hopeful paradox. Even though the vast majority of people fear grizzly bears, most would still like to see them back in wild areas. Seventy-seven percent of the national respondents were in favor. Of those who disapproved, over half did so because of safety concerns. It's noteworthy, also, that the farther away from the Bitterroot the people lived the more they were in favor of reintroduction; no doubt this says something about the reality of bears actually being in your backyard. But the fact that over sixty percent supported it locally says a whole lot about changes underway in the wild West. One of the respondents summed it up quite simply: "The bears belong in the mountains."

To this I would add that the bears belong other places, too. That's one reason I went to Alaska when I was a young man, because there were supposed to be bears all over the place.

It's a fact, if you want to live, work, or play in the Alaskan bush, you'd better be prepared for bears. The southern regions of Alaska are thick with them. The further north you go, though, the fewer you'll find (of course, with the exception of polar bears.) Still, enough grizzlies inhabit the north to make it interesting, even up in the high and wild Arctic.

Yes, the Arctic. For my money, if you can choose anyplace to go in Alaska, choose the Arctic. If you can choose a season, choose summer. It's a pitifully short time, though - July and few weeks on either side of it - when the sun refuses to set and just orbits around the horizon in long, slow, elliptical loops. In a land usually strangled by the hard hand of winter, the sun's relentless energy forces production; the Arctic buzzes and sings and grunts in an explosion of life. Migratory birds nest in the tundra and on the lakes. Tough, yet intricately delicate flowers bloom. Caribou, thousands of them, shift restless across the land, flowing like rivers from south to north and back south again. With the caribou come the wolf and the smaller predators like the Arctic fox and the wolverine. And over all this life lords the king, the very symbol of unadulterated North American wilderness, the so-called barren ground grizzly. This far north, though, the grizzlies are most often lean and hungry, a poor second to their

salmon-fat cousins in the rain forests to the south. But smaller, leaner, hungrier makes them even more a creature to be reckoned with.

I've done many trips in the Arctic. I can think of only one where I didn't run into at least one grizzly. Usually in a two week trip I'll see three or four. One trip in particular, though, stands out as the trip of many bears.

The summer of 1987 I climbed with Tom Ballantyne, my wilderness companion of many seasons, through a fog as thick as oatmeal. We were following a westward compass bearing, hoping to gain a pass at the head of a drainage that would take us back to the broad gravel wash of the Canning River, thirty miles away, the western boundary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We had cached our raft and the bulk of our gear on the Canning eight days earlier, then had shouldered sixty-five pound packs and walked east, with the intention of exploring a swatch of wild country along the headwaters of the purely wild Sadlerochit River.

Most of the trip we had been blessed with wonderful weather. But the world we moved through this particular day was a surrealistic, drizzling, white on gray cloak of fog, a separation from anything familiar. Odd forms would emerge like ghosts to metamorphose into rocks or hillsides. As I walked along I couldn't help recalling a time years earlier, my third summer in the north, when I was foreman of a crew of tough Athapascan Indians from the upper Yukon. We were building a recreational trail in the Crazy Mountains of the interior, leap-frogging a tent camp over a twenty-four mile loop of alpine tundra. As was the case in the summer in that country, we often worked in thick fog. One time I asked one of the men on the crew, a smart, fun-loving fellow named Isaac, to follow the cairns back to camp to pick up a tool we'd left, a distance no greater than a mile. "No way," he said. "No way I'm walking through that fog alone."

I was surprised at his resistance, because he was usually pretty agreeable fellow. "What's the problem?" I asked him.

"Last year," he said, "I was walking back to camp in a fog just like this one and I run head on into the biggest damn grizzly I ever seen. She had a cub with her. She whoofed once at me then turned back into the fog, disappeared like a god damned dream. I didn't know where she was."

"Probably scared her worse than she scared you," someone else said.

"Could be," Isaac said, "but I tell you one thing, your heart stops, you're just as dead as if a bear jumped you. No way I'm going off alone in no fog."

It was an attentive crew that worked the rest of that day. And it was an attentive pair of backpackers that moved through another fog twenty years later. Tom and I had been out close to three weeks already, and in that time we had seen plenty of grizzly signs. On one occasion we had surprised a young boar grazing contentedly among a small herd of caribou on a tundra hillside. On another we

had seen a bear move high above us on a mountain ridge, then disappear into low clouds. We knew we were well overdue to see more.

We continued to climb and eventually we gained the pass. But on top we couldn't figure where to turn; the country appeared to fall away too steeply on all sides to trust a descent in the fog. We talked it over and decided our only choice was to camp and wait.

The next morning the fog had cleared completely, so we resumed our journey down into a green Shangri La of a valley, as lush and inviting as any I've ever seen in the Arctic. At noon we stopped and ate lunch in the steep-walled canyon of the creek we'd been following. We were about done with lunch when I looked up and spotted a big grizzly standing on the canyon rim across from us. The bear was no more than a hundred yards away, but clearly didn't see us. We watched it poke around in a shallow ravine that ran down the canyon wall. Tom and I whispered to each other, trying to decide whether or not we should announce ourselves. Suddenly our presence became a moot point. The bear turned quickly and began climbing the mountain, throwing worried glances over his shoulder downstream as he did. We watched him climb high above us until he came to a heavy talus slope. There, like a dog, he turned round and round several times before he finally bedded down in the rocks.

We couldn't figure what had spooked that bear. But when we climbed out of the canyon the source quickly became evident. A quarter mile away another grizzly chased two caribou down-slope and across the creek, then up the steep canyon on the far side. The caribou easily outdistanced the bear, a fact that obviously perturbed it badly. As the bear climbed the far slope it swung its head back and forth in an exaggerated, aggressive, irritated way. Everything in its body language indicated an animal that had had enough of losing. "That's one aggressive bear were looking at," Tom said.

We knew we had to get up-wind from him; we wanted him to get our scent if he spotted us, not to mistake us for more caribou. So we started moving cautiously along the opposite side of the valley, doing our best not to attract his attention. We were doing fine it seemed. But just as we got directly opposite him he swung his head up and looked hard at us. In the next instant he broke for us, coming way too fast, in that rolling, flowing, ground-eating gait only a grizzly possesses.

We knew we had to gain some high ground fast, to do our best to get ourselves between the wind and the bear. But a couple of middle-aged guys running across rough tundra with heavy packs is no ballet performance. We stumbled and tripped across the hillside. A steep-sided ravine dropped sharply ahead of us. We plunged over the edge, panted and clawed our way up the other side, concerned that the bear might catch us where there was damn little maneuvering room.

When we made the top there was still no sign of the bear. We kept moving and made the rise. There we quickly turned to the direction we expected him to show, dropping our packs in the same motion.

The wind was at our backs now. Tom pulled out his camera and got ready to photograph the charge. I cranked a slug into the chamber of the shotgun I carried. At that instant the bear appeared over the edge of the canyon, coming for us at a dead run.

It takes a lot longer to tell it than it actually took. Toms motor drive began whirring. I pulled the shotgun up and held it on the bear's chest. As he closed on us we both hollered. Just as I was ready to pull the trigger, the bear computed the situation - smell, sound, sight - and suddenly, frantically, veered off and away from us. It was astounding how immediately his whole demeanor changed, how quickly he went from bold aggression to absolute panic. He headed away from us, sprinted up a forty-five degree slope, an incline that would have wind-broke me in about six seconds. In the next moment he disappeared over the top of the ridge.

As it is with any close call with a bear, a grand mix of emotions - joy, terror, relief - boils through you like a storm. That particular bear, though, left me with something else. I remember it very distinctly. Seeing his bold male swagger turn to witless panic, Tom and I had beheld how a human presence can so easily elicit terror in the most awesome of creatures. Witnessing his fear I felt embarrassed and deeply sad, embarrassed for the bear and embarrassed for my own species, sad for the legacy we have sown among wild creatures, how we have done so much to alienate the world we live in.

It took cranking a slug into the chamber of my shotgun, readying myself to shoot, before I finally came face to face with the kind of "non-hunter" I was. There I was, owned by my own fear. There I was, still depending on a firearm for protection. I was struck by the hard irony of it: for me to be in this wilderness place I loved I was prepared to kill one of the creatures that absolutely made what I loved about it. I had to ask myself that day, was the experience of being there really worth that kind of sacrifice?

In another way I also felt sad because I knew that only a few years earlier that bear would not have been so afraid of us. A few years earlier he most likely would have not even known what a human was; chances are he would not have run away. But with the push for oil development in Alaska's Arctic the past twenty-five years, those bears in the Arctic Refuge have been darted and tagged and shot at. Word has gotten around in the bear world: Watch out for those two-leggeds, they're bad medicine. Even in this faraway place, the bears are becoming subdued and fearful of humans. That particular bear, rightfully so, made a decision based on negative experience. He feared us, and we - all three of us - were lucky he did.

It's worth noting, though, that some bears may still be trying to decide if it's really worth caving in. The next noon Tom and I were eating lunch - beef jerky and hard jack cheese, guaranteed bear bait - on the banks of a little stream under a full sun. As was our routine on nice days, we leaned back on our packs and took a little nap after lunch. Suddenly I woke up scared; I could literally feel the hair standing up on the back of my neck. I looked around, but saw nothing. After a short spell I convinced myself it was just a weird dream, and went back to my nap.

When we packed up and left our lunch spot, we backtracked through the willows fringing the stream, exactly the way we had come in. On top of our tracks coming in were the largest grizzly tracks I've ever seen in the Arctic. A big bear had followed us into our lunch spot, gotten close, no more than twenty yards, had apparently watched us sleeping, and then who knows why, decided to turn around and leave us alone. From the looks of the tracks there was no panic in its retreat. This particular bear simply decided to leave. I felt cold fear. I couldn't help but imagine if that bear had decided differently.

It keeps coming back to fear. It seems to me there are two types of fear: legitimate fear and projected fear. Legitimate fear, like the fear I felt when the bear tried to get in the cabin with me, is real, there is clearly definable threat to some aspect of one's life, either carried from past experience or felt fully in the present moment. Projected fear, in contrast, is fear of the future, a fantasy of what *might* go wrong. It's like people warning me about the grizzlies in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Projected fear comes from the imagination; it takes people out of the moment and propels them into some fictionalized, negative situation in the future. Humans may be the only species on the planet with the capacity to project fear, to imagine what might go wrong, and then to create elaborate defense mechanisms - be they psychological or mechanical - to prepare for the possibility.

Of course, people project all kinds of fear on bears, and most have no legitimacy based in experience. Bears, all bears, on the other hand, suffer legitimate fear of people based on a couple of centuries of seriously negative encounters. This is not to say that bears, out of fear, will always turn away from us. Occasionally grizzlies, and even more rarely black bears, do kill people. I don't suppose this could be proven, but I think a good number of the bear attacks today are by animals that have just had it with humanity, bears that have gotten purely fed up with us meddling in their business. They overcome their own fear of us, and out of sheer frustration they attack.

Not very often, though. Mostly grizzly bears go out of their way to avoid humans. I once heard an Alaska Fish and Game official say that more people are killed by dogs in any given year in Alaska than are ever killed by bears. I suspect he's correct; I've personally known two children killed by Alaska dogs, and as I said earlier, I've never personally known anyone killed by a bear. Yet I've never seen any books dedicated to the horrors of dog attacks. I've seen several,

though, dedicated to the horror of bears. Nobody that I know of is talking about eliminating dogs from the ecosystem, or refuses to walk the streets because of the possibility of dog attack. In Montana, in a given year, more people are killed rock climbing or skiing than are killed in decades by bears. Yet people dont stop scaling cliffs or careening down ski slopes.

There's so much irony in it all. In wanting to have it our own way, in seeking what's missing in our overly civilized spirits, we so often tend to project fear on those attributes of nature that would seem to sustain us most, the very qualities that would lead us home to the missing parts, the wild, unscrubbed, unruly, arrogant, and at the same time, soft nature that is ultimately us.

Audre Lorde says it another way: " We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves ... within our deepest cravings. And the fear of our deepest cravings keeps them suspect, keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, and leads us to settle for or accept many facets of our own oppression."

Lordes nailed it. Our oppression is self imposed. We choose to fear the bear within us. We live in terror of those wild, untamed, restless places within and without. They wake us at night and keep us running scared during the day. Most of us don't seem to understand how our fears control us. Instead, we push against them until our souls bleed. We run scared to the shopping centers and movie houses, plug into the TV, drown ourselves in a hundred addictions, all under the misperceived notion that such activities will somehow provide solace. There's more sad irony to it all: the more we run from our fears the farther away from our essential, longing selves we're taken.

With all this I don't mean to imply that an experience with wilderness and bears is the only route home. But I will say that the combination is certainly one of the shortest paths I know of. Like that trip Tom and I took up in the Arctic. The bears were there for us, and we knew they were there, so there was no more running from the shadow. We were incapable of escaping our deepest cravings and fears, and in the process we could begin to discover that we really were alive. We were alive because we were forced to come face to face with our own mortality. And if I'm to understand anything about human psychology, it's that peace can begin to enter one's life when one accepts the inevitability of one's mortality; that's when real spiritual healing begins to take place.

In my mind, then, this is the only argument that's needed for the protection and restoration of primal wilderness: give us untamed places so that we may have the opportunity to come home to ourselves.

To this end I would add, may grizzly bears always roam the Earth. And all the other fearful creatures, too. Let's hear it for killer sharks and vipers and poisonous spiders. Unfurl the flag for crocodiles and sea snakes. Up with lions and tigers and rampaging elephants. Three cheers for panthers. And let's not forget polar bears. You want terror, those white demons creeping across an

ice flow like a stalking cat, thinking you're a ring seal, now that can turn the hardest heart to jelly. Hold on all you wild terrifying creatures, keep scaring us, because there's some hope that the tide of human consciousness is turning. I see evidence. Like what one of the interviewees in the Bitterroot grizzly reintroduction poll had to say: "I support it because I can't think of any reason not to." Now that kind of thinking I like.

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